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Joel Gwynne

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## Riley's handbook: 'Exegesis to his cryptic utterance'

### Abstract

On her departure in 1920, the novelist Jane Mander described New Zealand as 'a positively exciting country' (Belich 335). On her return in 1932, she lamented 'the barren wastes of Victorian philistinism', the 'brain-numbing, stimulus-stifling, soul-searing silence' (335) of colonial provincialism. Ironically, her grievances were expressed in a year that witnessed the birth of the vibrant literary journals *Tomorrow* and *Phoenix*; journals that would soon establish their reputation as preeminent voices of contention to a cultural landscape described by Frank Sargeson as 'The Grey Death, puritanism, wowserism gone most startlingly putrescent' (quoted in King 255).

JOEL GWYNNE

## Riley's Handbook: 'Exegesis to His Cryptic Utterance'

On her departure in 1920, the novelist Jane Mander described New Zealand as 'a positively exciting country' (Belich 335). On her return in 1932, she lamented 'the barren wastes of Victorian philistinism', the 'brain-numbing, stimulus-stifling, soul-searing silence' (335) of colonial provincialism. Ironically, her grievances were expressed in a year that witnessed the birth of the vibrant literary journals *Tomorrow* and *Phoenix*; journals that would soon establish their reputation as pre-eminent voices of contention to a cultural landscape described by Frank Sargeson as 'The Grey Death, puritanism, wowserism gone most startlingly putrescent' (quoted in King 255). First published in 1935, Sargeson was New Zealand's architect of literary decolonisation and principal exponent of realist short fiction. For Sargeson, literary expression was a process of catharsis and rebellion, and over the subsequent years, expatriation, suicide, anti-nationalism, political internationalism, and authorship were the disparate responses of the talented local artist. Indeed, Jane Mander's literal expatriation can be compared to Janet Frame's escape to the mind, Robin Hyde's to the grave, Rex Fairburn's to a sub-culture of masculine literati, and Frank Sargeson's to his retreat on Auckland's North Shore. Sargeson's literary response refuses to document exclusively the negations of a stagnant culture, but rather locates the beauty and affirmation of moments of transformation. Despite the diversity of responses, all of the prominent colonial writers recognised mainstream New Zealand society of the 1930s and '40s as a 'sterile, materialist and dreary ... wasteland' (Belich 335).

Duggan's narratives were collected in three volumes, *Immanuel's Land* (1956), *Summer in the Gravel Pit* (1965) and *O'Leary's Orchard and Other Stories* (1970), and by the publication of his first collection literary visions of New Zealand provincialism had not perceptibly changed. Considering the cultural milieu of the decade, this is perhaps not surprising; the Waterfront dispute of 1951, which led to the disestablishment of the union and censorship of apparently dissident material, proved that in the context of the Korean War and a continuing Anglo-American political deference, Sidney Holland's National government was not averse to practices that sustained cultural sterility. The impact of James K. Baxter's consequential call for free expression of opinion, 'Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry' (1951), was diminutive outside of literary culture. Bureaucratic despotism prevailed; the Customs Department censored Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and Dan Davin's *For the Rest of Our Lives*, while New Zealanders' first

sight of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* occurred in 1977, twenty-three years after its release. It was only as a consequence of the liberalising Indecent Publications Tribunal that the 1967 film adaptation of Joyce's *Ulysses* was screened to gender segregated adult audiences.

It was in this climate that Maurice Duggan's writing developed, and his publishing career, which spanned 1945–1974, also spanned much of the 'Provincial' and beginning of 'Post-provincial' periods. For the purposes of this discussion, the terms 'Provincial' and 'Post-provincial' refer to the multitude of cultural transitions that occurred in New Zealand and their representation as themes/tropes in literature. The 'Provincial' period is often marked by significations such as Puritanism, nationalism and the 'Man Alone', as discussed famously in Bill Pearson's *Fretful Sleepers* (1974), and usually in the mode of realism. By contrast, 'Post-provincial' literature often focuses on the 'new' generation of New Zealanders who, by the 1960s, began to move away from such imperatives and instead explored new concerns through increasingly divergent styles (rather than simply realism). Thus, when contextualizing Duggan in the history of New Zealand short fiction, it is important to state that his narratives are anomalous in both their affirmation of and resistance to 'Provincial' fictional practice. Consequently, even though Duggan's work has elicited a limited critical response, the responses are diverse. Many see his mode as extending the provincial, secular realist story exemplified by Frank Sargeson, who remained a close friend and mentor until Duggan's death in 1974. In opposition to this view stand critics who identify his prose as firmly developing the Katherine Mansfield tradition of symbolic, experimental impressionism: 'Reviewers noted that the stories seemed to focus on moments of experience in a way that New Zealand literature, with its largely social concerns, had seldom done since Mansfield' (Richards 216). Both assessments invite re-evaluation, especially in the context of the critical neglect of Duggan's work. The first paragraph of Terry Sturm's 1971 article, 'The Short Stories of Maurice Duggan', unwittingly predicted the response of critics for the remainder of the century and beyond:

It is surprising, in view of Maurice Duggan's reputation as one of New Zealand's major short story writers, that so little has in fact been written on his work. Apart from reviews of individual collections, commentary has been wholly confined to short discussions in general surveys of the New Zealand short story. (Sturm 50)

It is even more remarkable that, with the exception of a few articles in over thirty years, Sturm's appraisal remains accurate. Even the most extensive study of Duggan's work, Ian Richards' *To Bed at Noon: The Life and Art of Maurice Duggan*, is limited. Although the author acknowledges Duggan's status and makes an important concession:

His stories are also among the most complex in New Zealand literature, and a detailed analysis of each would require another book altogether. As a result, I have limited

myself to including comment on stories only insofar as the work throws some light on the development of Duggan's thinking, or on his developing strengths as a writer  
(Richards 3),

in declaring this in the introduction of his biography, Richards confirms that despite the importance of Duggan's prose, the critical attention to his work has barely developed since Terry Sturm's article, and that his biography cannot, understandably, fill the void.

Maurice Duggan's early narratives and the more established 'Lenihan cycle' in *Immanuel's Land* (1956) and *Summer in the Gravel Pit* (1965) testify to the difficulties in attempting to locate Duggan in either the realist or impressionist tradition. This is, perhaps, why his writing has received so little critical attention; it is stylistically anomalous in the genre of short fiction. Yet, there are important intersections that can be made between Duggan's non-'Provincial' mode and 'Provincial' subject, and in doing so, it is possible to locate his writing in the history of New Zealand short fiction. To achieve this, it is necessary to examine 'Riley's Handbook', Duggan's most brilliant and complex narrative that explores the process of self-destruction and self-identification. Simply put, the narrative describes one man's psychologically detrimental exploration of *who* he is, *what* he searching for, and *how* he can achieve contentment in a society he fails to comprehend. The narrative concerns Fowler, an artist who flees the community, changes his name to Riley and presents the reader with a bleak vision of his current state of existence, isolated both geographically and metaphorically from humanity. Like the early narrative, 'That Long, Long Road', it is almost entirely absent of plot, taking the form of a sustained tirade against both the absurdity of provincial life. While the often anthologised and established provincial parody 'Along Rideout Road that Summer' is often cited as Duggan's finest story, and sometimes the finest in the history of New Zealand literature, 'Riley's Handbook' has suffered from comparative disregard, despite its intelligent intensification of the 'Man Alone' motif that is the subject of parody in his earlier 'Along Rideout Road that Summer'. Although unfortunate, this neglect is to some degree understandable, for 'Riley's Handbook' is a vast multi-textured narrative, far too long for any anthology, and the eclecticism of its style would prove incongruous in any anthology in a country where realism is not merely the most dominant, but also the most critically acclaimed mode.<sup>1</sup> Richards astutely comments that 'Although many of his themes and subjects are similar to those of other New Zealand writers, his attitudes towards them are difficult to relate without distortion to any particular pattern in New Zealand fiction. His scepticism about "certainties" or "final truths" is much more uncompromising than, for example, Frank Sargeson's' (Richards 52). 'Riley's Handbook' is the ultimate distortion of the social pattern (the mode of fiction as practiced by Duggan's fellow 'Provincial' exponents): the 'Man Alone' is explored but not defined, and the narrative poses multiple problems for the critic attempting to find a place for

it. This arguably explains why critics have emphasised, and even attacked, its linguistic exuberance, rather than its subject: as the content of a text is difficult to locate within the local fictional paradigm, then critics have found it expedient to focus on locating its style in the local fictional paradigm. C.K. Stead recalls the critical response, 'I remember, when "Riley's Handbook" first appeared in *Landfall*, hearing it cheerfully dismissed, by people who ought to have known better and who were clearly not going to persist with it, as verbose, pointless, unreadable.' The position Stead espouses, is one that also identifies linguistic exuberance as the story's claim on literary value, but observes,

that if, one hundred years from now, there should be a continuing interest in our own literary history (and of course that is something which could be lost entirely) most of the literary work which grabs immediate attention will either be forgotten, or will be looked back upon as quaint relics of a long-lost age. "Riley's Handbook", on the other hand, will still read like living language. (Stead 127)

I would suggest that 'Riley's Handbook' is not merely a unique stylistic achievement, but is rather a proclamation of Duggan's complete formation as an artist. Indeed, prior to its publication in 1961, he discussed his literary obstacles with his friend, the poet and historian Keith Sinclair: 'I am engaged in the dreary and very chastening business of wondering what in Christ it's all about. I'm bored stiff with Duggan's style and Duggan's attitudes and Duggan's little puppets ... I still want for my subject — what a confession for a writer aged thirty-seven. Not the detail, for that is there, but the theme, the frame, the informing obsession' (quoted in Richards 261). Duggan was still suffering from the problems identified by Dan Davin in 1951: 'He shares with me the Irish curse of rhetoric and the problem of writing about a background which is Irish Catholic which James Joyce has exhausted' (quoted in Richards 151). Richards observes that 'The idea of being a Joycean writer-in-exile may have had its momentary appeal, but it did not have the emotional influence that Duggan found New Zealand exerted on his thinking' (Richards 106). Duggan needed to consolidate his personal experience, literary influences, and awareness of the New Zealand subject, in order to fulfil his enormous potential. It is in this way that 'Riley's Handbook' represents his fullest achievement; it is a solipsistic exploration of self and identity, inspired by a combination of personal experience and literary influence. As a Burns Fellow at Otago University, Duggan temporarily relocated to Dunedin on the South Island, where he stayed at the Captain Cook pub. In a letter to Sargeson, he described the Cook's patrons as 'the awful spectacle of the New Zealander enjoying himself. Without strong drink that would be an unendurable sight. ... The place is crammed to bursting with crazy humanity; it might be called Beckett's Reach' (Richards 254). 'Beckett's Reach' becomes Tunny's Reach in 'Riley's Handbook', and by comparing the ordinary New Zealander to Beckett's incompetents, Duggan was commencing the process of consolidating life and art for the first time.

It is not difficult to locate the intersection of Duggan, Riley and Beckett's fictional creations. Like Joyce's refusal to accord with Stephen Dedalus' notorious doctrine that 'The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible' (Joyce 132), Riley's self-portrait can be interpreted as revealing Duggan's pre-eminent concerns and life history:

In the matter of disguise let me admit that I considered playing the part of a paralytic in a wheelchair. I had the talent for that part, I imagine; but the problem of earning enough money to support myself, except through the manufacture of felt toys and paper flowers, decided me against it. Better to continue to stumble about. Why the disguise at all? I had a small reputation, nothing either grand or accurate, as a painter. Abstract, of course; what else can it be if it's art at all? (Duggan 1961 56)

At the age of nineteen Duggan developed osteomyelitis, and soon after his left leg was amputated at the knee. It was a source of physical pain and emotional trauma for the remainder of his life, and as a consequence of this disability he spent much of his time employed in factories producing small merchandise: the role Riley resists. Indeed, it is interesting that Riley considers and rejects all of the physical and vocational conditions that Duggan was forced to experience; it suggests that Riley represents an alternative self liberated from these afflictions. Duggan certainly admired his fictional creation, and was heard referring to himself as Riley in the company of Fleur Adcock (Richards 78); Riley is, essentially, the metaphorical mediator between Duggan and Beckett. It is perhaps not surprising that Duggan related to and admired Beckett's work, since over the course of his life he developed the multiple afflictions of Beckett's characters; alcoholism, immobility, and a misanthropic anti-faith in the essentially flawed nature of humanity. Duggan might even be recognised in Riley's evocation of his Heideggerian 'factual' situation<sup>2</sup> illustrated through his ill health: 'Head naked and eyes protuberant, from smoke or booze or lack of sleep, some trembling of the hands, Huntingdon's chorea if my mother had a thigh in it, and the neck thick ... Remainder equally undistinguished except for the heavy breathing; something shot to ribbons somewhere. The lung, one or both I never enquired' (Duggan 1961 65). Duggan invested his suffering in Riley, who is by extension strikingly similar to Beckett's Malone: the latter even inhabits a room in a house whose location he does not know. Malone has no recollection of his arrival in the room, and in 'Riley's Handbook' the reader has no awareness of how Riley arrived at Tunny's Reach. It is also interesting that Molloy embarks upon a desultory quest for his mother, and 'Riley's Handbook' has been described as 'a fictionalised lament for mother-love both withheld from a child and repudiated by it' (Richards 23). Mary Duggan died of heart failure when Maurice was only seven, which again reveals the tripartite correlations that can be made between Duggan, Beckett and Riley; connections that are not exclusively isolated to superficial details. Indeed, 'Riley's Handbook' appropriates the formal aesthetics of 'Malone Dies', and

a juxtaposition of the final paragraphs of both narratives, which delineate the deaths of Riley and Malone, is arresting:

Lemuel is in charge, he raises his hatchet on which the blood will  
 never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will  
 not hit anyone any more, he will not touch anyone any more,  
 either with it or with it or with it or with or  
 or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his fist or  
 in in dream I mean never he will never  
 or with his pencil or with his stick or  
 or light light I mean  
 never there he will never  
 never anything  
 there  
 any more. (Beckett 289)

Duggan inverts the composition of Malone's death; Lemuel's disintegration accords with the gradual attrition of the self, whilst Riley's death accords with the fictional resurrection of deceased family members:

All still now at last and steady as maNan thunders down long corridors  
 towards me in sweet airs in light as lovely as jade to stand looming to tower  
 and reach down a cool and blessing hand. MaNan? Pegeen?  
 Riley from there looking up at last.  
 Am I too late? It's someone speaking above the roar. Whose voice? Possible  
 only to guess. In the roaring blood under the jade shadow.  
 A gentle quiet man? (Duggan 1961 63)

The passage suggests that Beckett's influence was profound; as death arrives both narratives become fragmented, ambiguous and structurally limitless.

It is clear that 'Riley's Handbook' includes congruencies with both Duggan's life and Beckett's oeuvre, yet it is crucial to probe the narrative's subject. Richards states that the narrative concentrates 'less emphasis on philosophy and more on psychology' (274). This is highly debatable; the narrative is, I believe, densely philosophical, exploring the self in a manner that accords with Cartesian investigations, and thus extending the 'Man Alone' enquiry and positing the provincial New Zealand subject at the centre of humanity. Even though there is no evidence that Duggan was interested in Cartesian ontology, he was, as we have seen, intensely interested in the work of Beckett, and it is very difficult to understand and, to a lesser extent, enjoy Beckett, if one is not interested in Cartesian ontology or, more simply, investigations of the self: these considerations are not merely dimension or themes in Beckett's work, but govern the entire Beckettian *modus operandi*. Duggan's interest in Beckettian explorations of the self might account for Patrick Evans' claim that the narrative is 'obscure, "difficult" and opaque' (229), and his concession that, 'This quality, and the great demands it places on Duggan's readers, are of more importance to this discussion than are any remarks on its "meaning"' (229). In 'Along Rideout Road that Summer', the protagonist Buster complains that the object of his affections, Fanny, offers no interpretation



of her father's thoughts, no 'Exegesis to his cryptic utterance' (Duggan 1956 57). Similarly, despite Evans' predominantly local focus in 'Maurice Duggan and the Provincial Dilemma' (1982), his essay does demonstrate that the inaccessibility of the narrative has led critics to decentre its content and accentuate its linguistic turbulence. Yet, the text deserves a focused analysis of its content. Riley realises that in exploring the self he must 'move, therefore, further into this morass, this indecency, this exposure and recognition, this process of discovery on a voyage without hope' (Duggan 1970 61). His seclusion in Tunny's Reach, a marginalised settlement of dysfunctional characters on the edge of sanity and civilisation (both metaphorically and geographically), represents a withdrawal that coerces a confrontation with the self that corresponds with the mind/body disconnections of Descartes and later Cartesian ontology. The classic Cartesian *cogito* that establishes the mind as the only location of the self is a doctrine that fascinates Riley:

Who is the who who would change? Me? Bright lunacy, reflective lunacy, a simple sailing skyward moony matter. The choice is somewhat too absurd. I want no part of it. Who would be then the who who is inescapably Riley? What is the large freedom they propose other than the things I am in flight from? He is not Riley; doubtless that's how they put it to themselves; doubtless that's the grisly bit of thought they've been chewing on all this while. Then who am I? It's not, I realize, to be answered by a purely negative description of the things I am not. (Duggan 1961 71)

The passage embodies Heidegger's thesis that *Dasein* possesses an understanding of its own being, that knowledge is the 'presence' of a thing to consciousness, thus what is present to Riley's consciousness is, essentially, not Riley. In Sartrean terms, things cannot be present to *être-en-soi*, objects in themselves, only present to *être-pour-soi*, nothingness; Riley's consciousness is opposed to, yet cannot be defined in relation to, *être-en-soi*. His recognition that *être-pour-soi* negates *être-en-soi*, which connects the narrative to the early 'That Long, Long Road', throws into disarray R.A. Copland's criticism that Duggan is a realist writer whose work fails to demonstrate 'a modelling up from the imagination', (Copland 78) and also Bill Pearson's that 'his vision is static' (quoted in Richards 217). Even if Duggan had failed to consummate this realisation in his early writing, then 'Riley's Handbook' reveals how far his writing had developed by the late 'Provincial' period (1934-1964) the external world is imaginatively distorted and energised through Riley's incessant internal examinations and external criticisms. His aporias are rhetorical impasses, spaces of radical indeterminacy where distinctions collapse and arguments defeat themselves by espousing their diametrical opposites. His attacks on much of humanity and the benchmarks of civilisation, marriage, women and specifically religion, expose that, (given the absence of God) Riley converts the reticently optimistic philosophy of Descartes into a fundamentally pessimistic view of the world. For Riley, there is no longer any confirmation of the reality of the external world; nothing to anchor the self in any secure relation to its surroundings: 'Father Royle, dollman in his armozeen

smock, dream pedlar in his driving gloves, the parish zephyr, holy purveyor of toy concepts and sugarcoated reassurances for ingrown adults afraid of their dark and their humanity' (Duggan 1970 73). Riley's vision of existence is secular; if the idea of God did not exist, then no one could feel the painfulness of its absurdity, and if the idea that life has meaning did not exist, then the meaninglessness of life could hurt no one. Thus, Riley's atheism extends to multiple anti-humanisms of Kierkegaardian proportions; his perspective accords with Kierkegaard's in the attestation that any individual who commits himself to thinking about human existence is involved in a comic and pathetic quest:

Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving, and is both comic and pathetic in the same degree. It is pathetic because the striving is infinite; that is, it is directed towards the infinite, being an actualization of infinitude, a transformation which involves the highest pathos. It is comic, because such striving involves self-contradiction.

(Kierkegaard 84)

In a harangue that appears to latently employ ideas central to Freud's 'Civilization and its Discontents', Riley attributes the role of humanising innate male aggression to women, perceiving it as a self-sacrificing, civilising role that is ultimately futile and absurd:

To damp out the fire, to domesticate the beast, to wash away the rank odours and stifle the bestial tortured cries, that is her plan. And it would be Myra's plan, too, if the hope were let burgeon there. To dress out the untamed, the raging and prophetic beast, as husband, father, citizen, responsible adult (ha) and peck it away to the office. For what? For what you see about you; the towering, stinking absurdity. Pfuh! As if ninety-nine percent of all human activity weren't the most insane waste of time.

(Duggan 1961 74)

Once again, the intersection of Riley and Duggan is conspicuous; the latter conceded his pessimism in conversation with Rev. Bob Walsh, an alcoholism counsellor at Auckland's Oakley Hospital:

Basically I have for a long time seen most of human life and endeavour as absurd... Being what's known as sober in these terms isn't comfortable — but who said it was to be? The uneasy realisation for the alcoholic when he has dried out is that he is waking to the ruin he has made and that there isn't going to be any prize, any reward, just for keeping off the sauce, just for ceasing to pursue unsustainable because unearned euphoria. (qtd in Richards 381)

It is this intense pessimism, and to a certain extent misanthropy, that connects Duggan with Schopenhauer, a Cartesian for whom to exist was to suffer:

Then, instead of the restless pressure and effort; instead of the constant transition from desire to apprehension and from joy to sorrow; instead of the never satisfied and never-dying hope that constitutes the life-dream of the man who wills, we see that peace that is higher than all reason, that ocean-like calmness of the spirit, that deep tranquility, that unshakeable confidence and serenity, whose mere reflection in the countenance ... is a complete and certain gospel. Only knowledge remains; the will has vanished.

(Janaway 92)

In conjunction with Schopenhauer, Riley shares with Kierkegaard the belief that the only course of action for the suffering individual is to deny the 'will to live'; the will is, ultimately, the most distressing facet of existence. Indeed, it is the will that Riley identifies as the fundamental force of humanity, and that any self-examination invariably situates the will as the source of sustaining and reconstructing the self: 'I do know that the common prescription recommending change neglects to describe processes or to outline methods or to describe that paradise that is to follow on the hot heel of the event. The same old hell: the will' (Duggan 1961 86). Once again Riley exemplifies the paradoxically pessimistic humanism of Cartesian philosophy; like Sartre, he attests to the encumbrance and responsibility of freedom, and like Kierkegaard, identifies this value-conferring freedom as the source of Angst. It is another example of the intersections between 'Riley's Handbook', and even Duggan, and the Cartesian ontology of Descartes, Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer: each is developed from the idea that the self and world are disconnected, each places emphasis on the mind's ability to form the world, and each places the development of the self at the centre of the human condition. 'Riley's Handbook' proposes greater questions than any other 'Provincial' narrative, extending the local subject to universal proportions in its consideration of what it is to be human and what we, as humans, can offer to humanity.

In her discussion of the protagonist of A.P. Gaskell's 'All Part of the Game', Lydia Wevers states: 'His transition into an adult environment, in which those who don't succeed or conform are ignored or rejected, functions as a critique of that environment in a way that it is typical of the male realist tradition' (Wevers 231). Without actually discussing 'Riley's Handbook', Wevers' recapitulation conveys the disparity between a narrative like 'Riley's Handbook' and the male realist tradition; Riley supports self-determination, which largely explains why humanity, and in particular the determinisms that exert their influence on all of us, frustrates him. Yet, Wevers proceeds to identify a component of the male, secular realist tradition that corresponds with 'Riley's Handbook': 'In the stories of A.P. Gaskell, the typical New Zealand male likes football and beer, finds relationships with women difficult' (Wevers 230). Despite the universal philosophical enquiry of 'Riley's Handbook' regarding what drives us as human beings, it is vital to determine the narrative's locality. This can be achieved by examining patterns of ideological investment that accord with the frequently latent and often manifest misogyny of male-authored provincial fiction. Certainly, if we retreat from the late-Cartesian territory of identifying values as products of action, and instead acknowledge values as inscriptions of culture, it is important to realise that whilst Sturm evaluates Duggan's connection with the 'Man Alone' thematic, he fails to acknowledge that this trend in 'Provincial' fiction is, at worst misogynistic, and at best dismissive of female experience:

For Duggan the whole issue of 'Man Alone' is complicated by difficult moral ambiguities. His rootless characters are usually intelligent, extremely self-conscious, and sensitive (in the sense that they have a hyper-active inner life), with an often obsessive awareness of the moral and social hypocrisies which they reject. On the other hand Duggan has a keen sense of the illusions which such apparent freedom can foster: the habit of cutting loose, 'taking it lightly' (as he describes it in 'Voyage') can easily become a habit of moral irresponsibility, a deliberate refusal to commit oneself to any relationships or principles, and their consequences. (Sturm 57)

Riley reinforces the 'Man Alone' motif, specifically the 'cutting loose' to which Sturm refers. Wevers observes that, in order to escape from entrapment 'the process of transition typically provides the narrative structure of Duggan's fictions' (Wevers 234). Riley's narrative begins with his escape into the territory of a new, independent if dislocated life: 'Nor am I the first to find that I am wanting not only in a sense of direction but also in a sense of their being anywhere to go' (Duggan 1961 87). He commences the narrative as the classic 'Man Alone' figure: 'I have deprived the community of very little; very little considering the depth of my contempt for the community' (78). It is not clear what Riley is initially fleeing from, as upon meeting him he appears to exist in a chasm of Existentialist temporality; he is a formless and ambiguous figure, unable to reconcile the hiatus between past and present. The only information the narrative provides is that he needs to change his name, and once again he relates this to escape from a small-town environment: 'Even a change of name, in so small and stinking a country, if I may say it, is cover too thin to afford much protection' (78). Yet, it becomes clear that Riley's predicament is not singularly parochial, but also embedded in his relations with women. This firmly locates 'Riley's Handbook' in its contemporary ideological landscape, even if it is stylistically irreconcilable with any other New Zealand writer. Indeed, Sargeson's 'The Hole That Jack Dug' and Maurice Shadbolt's 'The Woman's Story' are merely two examples of provincial fictions where women are invariably culpable in inhibiting male freedom and destroying male aspirations that extend beyond domestic territory. Sturm states that 'Most obsessive of all, however, is Riley's disgust with sex and procreation... he has a Manichean disgust for all merely physical processes because they reveal, more than anything else, the imprisonment of man in time' (69). Sturm's view of the narrative is loosely Cartesian, and whilst it is possible to compare Riley to Beckett's representation of the body as merely an unwanted and repellent vessel for the mind, I believe that Riley is not actually disgusted by the physical process of sex, but rather disgusted by his female sexual partners. His misogyny is both sexual and ideological, the latter discernible in his discussion of his deserted wife Leah:

I know the cast of her thinking. If she only persists, without trying to bully me; if she only reminds without recrimination; if she only continues, without faltering, to express her deadly calm intention, her unnatural resolve to forget and forgive; if she can only get me to understand; if through patience and perseverance and sympathy she can only

get em to see the uselessness, the futility, of my rage, all, she is sure, will then be well. She expects to succeed. I know her; I know her passion for understanding, her belief that to know is to master. To understand! What hours we have spent, in the past, in trying to understand the incomprehensible, the inconsequential and the inexplicable. How many million words have we spent on the subject of what is now Riley? What a rage is induced in me in the face of this calm and unwavering belief in the power of reason; reason at the service, let us be plain, of the conservative, female, suburban and domestic compromise. (Duggan 1961 98)

Riley's view is biologically essentialist: 'It is for them that the hunter is induced to hand up the blazoned shield, the long spear, his balls and his inheritance. It is for them that he dandles upon his knee the baby powdered and diapered symbol of the defeat of his moment of wild and impermissible hope' (89) Riley's scarce consideration of the sacrifices many women perform for motherhood exposes the patriarchal sexist male/female dichotomy in New Zealand short fiction; women writers have responded passionately to 'Man Alone' fictions through the 'Post-provincial' development of the 'suburban neurosis' story. Riley's essentialism attributes female masochism and self-sacrifice for man as a collective, to a female desire for annihilation. This value is central to patriarchal ideology, and Riley's essentialism supports Freud's equally sexist conviction that the masochism of the female psyche is organic: 'The suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses which succeed in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards' (Freud 56). Riley is convinced that his new life of quiet isolation would not fulfil Leah's latent demands: 'She would rather, I know, that I shouted, argued, and raved; that's at least the known, the familiar pre-Riley. She would rather I struck her. And once or twice I have been close to that — the back of my hand on her talking mouth. But no; one touch, one blow or one caress, and even that has in my madness crossed my mind, for she is a woman, one move and I am done, undone' (82). After leaving Leah and fleeing to Tunny's Reach, Riley discloses his sexual misogyny in his relations with Myra: 'Myra is no catch; but we serve a purpose for each other' (80). It never becomes clear what purpose Riley serves for Myra; it is certainly not emotional. He conveys a disconcerting interest in speculating on the quantity of Myra's sexual partners: 'I am to believe that my suggestion that she might be going with two men, or six, at one time is distasteful to her. A highprincipled whore if you like' (84). This is connected with an impassive view of her childhood sexual abuse: 'Who with Myra was first, after her father on bathnights taking dexterous liberties, a Woking man, I have yet to hear to tell' (86). The abuse is merely documented, and given a significance equivalent to her father's birth place. Nor is Myra satisfied in her sexual relations with Riley: 'Myra has reached her point of protest at last. She is not prepared to continue the stark routine. A little decoration, a few frills, a word even now and again of tenderness, the confession of a need; it doesn't cost anything. Her words not

mine. In short she pines for the usual fucking wrapping, the common deceits of the common and ancient game' (87). It is not clear whether Riley classifies marriage as the central component of bourgeois, provincial suburbia, and thus sublimates his feelings into a homogenised view of women. However, his attitude is palpable when summarising his relations with all women:

I can at this stage surely say, without boasting, that I have never understood how it was with women or what they saw in me or why it was that in the face of a moral, emotional and financial bankruptcy, all clearly stated by me from the very first, they were so reluctant to leave and so difficult finally to be rid of, even when told their place was taken. (78)

It is due to this level of patriarchal sexological discourse within the 'Provincial' tradition that the feminist movement was so fierce in New Zealand. In discussing the 1984 assault on playwright Mervyn Thompson, Kai Jensen recognises that 'Thompson had stepped on to a stage that several generations of male writers had constructed for him' (Jensen 3). In *The Sexual Wilderness* (1985), Sue Kedgley identified the culpability of the 'Provincial' period as the source of contemporary discord between feminist women and literary men, and A.R.D. Fairburn provides an extreme example of 'Provincial' misogyny in 'The Woman Problem'. The author declares that 'women have little notion of abstract justice' (quoted in Jensen 80), 'are incapable of attaching importance to principles of any kind' (80) and 'can act "immorally" with much greater ease of conscience than a man' (80). It is important to realise that Fairburn's essay is a personal vision that fails to encompass the perspective of all of his prominent contemporaries; for Fairburn, homosexuals were guilty of multiple transgressions, including a domination of New Zealand literary circles, and propagation of the romantic 'heresy' of male and female equality. Yet, in the framework of Fairburn's identification of the masochism of women, through declaring their gratification in marital submission, it is possible to position Riley as the epitome of local virulent, creative and aggressive masculinity. Yet, despite this concurrency between Duggan and his contemporaries, it is very difficult to perceive him as representative of fellow male Provincial authors, not merely because of his stylistic eclecticism, but also in conceptual terms: none of his contemporaries explored the internal world of the self with such a degree of complexity, self-reflexivity and inaccessibility.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Even Michael Morrissey's anthology *The New Fiction* (1985), which aimed to centralise non-realism, excluded 'Riley's Handbook'.
- <sup>2</sup> In Heideggerian understanding, a 'factual situation' is simply the negative quality of the situation, colloquially put, 'the way it is'.

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